

# The San Diego Union-Tribune.

## TREATMENT PLANT PRAISED

By Mike Lee  
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POINT LOMA – San Diego won a bet worth up to \$1.5 billion yesterday, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency granted the city's main wastewater treatment plant a preliminary third exemption from the Clean Water Act.

In giving the reprieve, also called a waiver, federal regulators praised recent disinfection improvements at the Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant. They also said the city's voluminous records on water quality around the facility's ocean discharge pipe don't suggest damage to the marine environment.

The waiver, which will be good for five years, is expected to be completed early next year after a public hearing in January.

EPA officials said San Diego should not plan on receiving more exemptions. They want the city to expand water recycling – turning wastewater into irrigation or drinking water – to reduce the amount of waste discharged from the Point Loma plant.

“The thinking that we can simply use water once, treat it and discharge it to the ocean is becoming an outdated paradigm,” said Alexis Strauss, the EPA's water chief in San Francisco.

The Point Loma plant will remain the nation's largest sewage facility that doesn't have at least a plan to meet the federally mandated “secondary” treatment level for removal of solids and other pollutants.



LAURA EMBRY / Union-Tribune

The Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant will remain the nation's largest sewage facility that doesn't have at least a plan to meet the federally mandated “secondary” treatment level to remove solids.



LAURA EMBRY / Union-Tribune

Enrique Blanco checked the grease and oil levels passing into and out of the plant. The wastewater is cleaned and then piped about 4.5 miles offshore.

It processes about 175 million gallons of sewage a day generated by more than 2.2 million residents. The wastewater is cleaned to the “advanced primary” level and then piped about 4.5 miles offshore.

EPA officials rarely issue waivers, and the Point Loma plant is the last in California without a strategy for reaching “secondary” treatment. But federal officials said San Diego has met the technical standards needed for an exemption.

“The city's application demonstrates that plant operations, including the recent upgrade to disinfect treated wastewater, result in a discharge that protects recreational users of San Diego's ocean waters and ensures a healthy marine ecosystem,” said Wayne Nastri, the agency's regional administrator.

The EPA needs agreement from the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board and the state Coastal Commission.

John Robertus, executive officer of the board, said he's not aware of any reason to deny a third exemption. The agency's decision rests with its board members.

Patrick Kruer, chairman of the Coastal Commission, said he wouldn't comment before his colleagues formally review the waiver data.

A third waiver would save money for residents across the region because several agencies, including Chula Vista and Otay Water District, send sewage to the Point Loma plant and pay for about one-third of its costs.

San Diego officials have pegged the expense of retrofitting the Point Loma plant at up to \$1.5 billion, partly because the facility is boxed in by federal land and there's little room for expansion. To pay for the upgrades, member agencies almost certainly would have to raise utility rates.

## OVERVIEW

**Background:** San Diego's Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant does not meet federal standards for the partly cleaned sewage that it discharges about 4.5 miles offshore. It received its first waiver in 1995 after a drawn-out process that started in 1979, then obtained its second exemption in 2002.

**What's new:** The Environmental Protection Agency yesterday issued a third, preliminary waiver allowing the city to keep operating the facility at its current treatment level. The ruling means San Diego and other wastewater districts that use the Point Loma plant can delay, and possibly avoid, a retrofit costing up to \$1.5 billion.

**The future:** The EPA and the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board will hold a public hearing Jan. 21. Then the exemption will go to the California Coastal Commission for a sign-off before it is completed.

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## POINT LOMA WASTEWATER TREATMENT PLANT

San Diego city owns the Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant, which is used by 15 other agencies.

### Cities:

Chula Vista  
Coronado  
Del Mar  
El Cajon  
Imperial Beach  
La Mesa  
National City  
Poway

### Sanitation and water districts:

East Otay Mesa  
Lakeside/Alpine  
Lemon Grove  
Otay  
Padre Dam  
Spring Valley  
Winter Gardens

**SOURCE:** U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders championed the waiver starting in 2007, after an environmental study that he commissioned found no significant harm to the ocean caused by the treatment plant.

He welcomed yesterday's announcement, saying it will allow his city to concentrate on other infrastructure upgrades.

Strauss said the EPA's decision was based on the lack of ecological damage and the city's efforts to control pollutants at the Point Loma site – not the city's budget shortfall.

She urged Sanders to use the next five years to “examine really meaningful ways to wean everyone from the dependence on everything going out the Point Loma outfall.” However, Strauss said the waiver does not contain a requirement for the city to increase water recycling.

In recent weeks, environmental groups have negotiated with city leaders about forgoing a retrofit at the Point Loma plant in favor of increasing wastewater recycling, said Bruce Reznik, head of the environmental group San Diego Coastkeeper. He aims to have an agreement in place by the Jan. 21 hearing.

Sanders said he was open to discussion. “I think we all have the same goal in mind – that is to have clean water in San Diego,” he said.